

The Dead in Christ

(1 Thessalonians 4:13–18)



SABBATH—AUGUST 18

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; Acts 17:3; 1 Corinthians 15:20–23, 51–58; John 5:28, 29; Revelation 20:4–6.

MEMORY VERSE: “The Lord himself will come down from heaven. We will hear a loud command. We will hear the voice of the leader of the angels. We will hear a blast from God’s trumpet. Many who believe in Christ will have died already. They will rise first” (1 Thessalonians 4:16, NIV).

KEY (IMPORTANT) THOUGHT: Paul gives the Thessalonians (and us) a powerful hope for the future. This is the promise of the second coming of Christ.

IN THE VERSES FOR THIS WEEK (1 THESSALONIANS 4:13–18), PAUL IS DEALING WITH AN ERROR AMONG THE THESSALONIANS. It is not clear what the error is. But some members are very depressed about the fate of the believers who died before Jesus’ return. The problem seems to be about the difference between those who died before Jesus’ return and those who will be alive when it happens.

This week we will study what is known about the situation that led Paul to write 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. In these verses, Paul corrects first-century misunderstandings. And he gives solid ground on which Christians in the twenty-first century can stand: “The Lord and King never does anything without telling his servants the prophets [messengers from God] about it” (Amos 3:7, NIV). Through this prophecy (special message from God) of the apostle (teacher and leader) Paul, the Lord shows us wonderful truths about the Second Coming. As we study these verses, prayerfully think about the wonderful hope that is in Paul’s prophecy for us.

SUNDAY—AUGUST 19

**THE SITUATION IN
THESSALONICA
(1 Thessalonians 4:13–18)**

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. List the clues in these verses that point to the false beliefs in the Thessalonian church. These false beliefs brought grief that was not necessary to those who held them.

In the Jewish religion of Paul’s day, there were several different opinions about the end time. One of these viewpoints crept into the Thessalonian church. We are not certain exactly what it was. It seems to have been the idea that all of God’s faithful would share in the world to come. But only those who were alive at the end would be carried up into heaven. Those who died before the end would return to life and remain on earth.

This belief system would make people think that it would be a serious disadvantage to die before the end came. It would also mean a separation between those taken to heaven and those left on earth. If the Thessalonians during Paul’s time lived until the end, they would go to heaven at the second coming of Jesus. Then they would have to leave their dead loved ones behind on earth. (Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13, 14.)

So, it is no surprise that Paul begins 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 with a comment about the church’s lack of knowledge. There were important things about the prophecy (message from God) on

the Second Coming that the church did not know. There were also other things they would need to unlearn.

As we think about prophecy, we must remember that it is not given to satisfy our curiosity about the timing and details of end-time events. Prophecy has a special purpose. God designed (planned) it to teach us how to live. It is planned to give encouragement and purpose, especially in the midst of suffering and loss. This is because the prophecies of the Bible have life-changing power. In other words, it is important to believe like an Adventist (which means believing in Bible prophecy). But it is even more important to live like one.

What does it mean to “live like an Adventist”? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Babylon _____

Medo-Persia _____

Greece _____

Pagan Rome _____

Papal Rome _____



Prophecy has a special purpose. God designed it to teach us how to live.

MONDAY—AUGUST 20

**HOPELESS GRIEF
(1 Thessalonians 4:13)**

According to 1 Thessalonians

4:13, why did Paul write verses 13–18? Why should these verses mean so much to us today?

Why were the Thessalonian believers grieving as if they had no hope? One big reason was probably the short stay that Paul had with them. We know that Paul talked about the death and resurrection (return to life) of Jesus (Acts 17:3). There is also proof that Paul talked about final events. But his instruction was misunderstood. Paul may not have had time to be clear about the resurrection of believers.

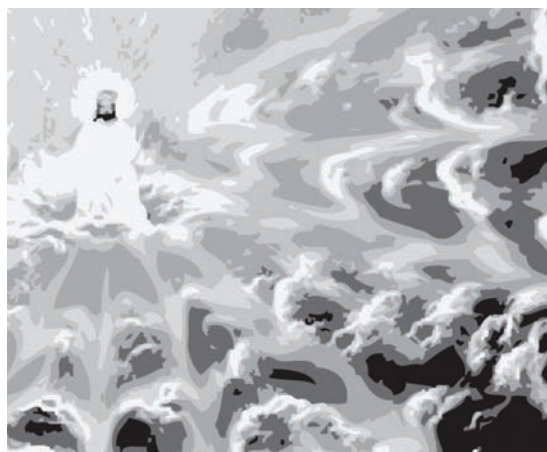
An additional reason was the pagan (idol-worshipping) background of most of the believers to whom Paul was writing (1 Thessalonians 1:9). Pagan religions offered a picture of the afterlife. But most pagans (idol-worshippers) had no hope of life after death. A good example of this is found in a second-century letter from a mother who had lost her son: “Irene to Taonnophris and Philo good comfort. I am as sorry and weep [cry] over the departed [dead] one as I wept for Didymas, my son. And all things I have done, and all mine, Epaphroditus and Thermuthion and Philion and Apollonius and Plantas. But, anyway, against such things one can do nothing. Therefore comfort ye one another. Good bye.”—Adapted from Adolf Deissmann, *Light From the Ancient East* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927), page 176.

It is rather odd that this letter ends with the same words as 1 Thessalonians 4:18, even if the two letters have different meanings.

“Comfort one another,” but the mother adds, “even though there is no hope.” What a sharp (strong) difference between these words and what Paul is writing to the Thessalonians.

Paul’s purpose for the verse is outlined (explained) in different words at the beginning and the end. Paul writes so that the Thessalonians stop grieving as if they have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). And Paul wants to say that the truth about the Second Coming will give them glorious (worthy of praise) reasons to comfort one another in times of loss (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

Someone once said, “In the long run, we’re [we are] all dead anyway.” From the human viewpoint, that is right. But, according to the Bible, that view is very short-sighted. In the long run, what is the great hope we have in Jesus? And how can we learn to be comforted by that hope right now?



Paul wants the truth about the Second Coming to give comfort to the believers in times of loss.

TUESDAY—AUGUST 21**DYING AND RISING
(1 Thessalonians 4:14)**

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:14. What hope does Paul offer for those who have died?

In verse 14, Paul gives the answer to the problem of hopeless grief. In the original language, Paul describes the believers who have died as having “fallen asleep in” Jesus (NIV). Falling asleep is a common metaphor (example) for death in New Testament times. But the normal wording for a believer who has died is that he or she has “fallen asleep in Jesus” or “in Christ.” A good example of this is the “dead in Christ” of verse 16.

A second issue with the verse is the idea that God will “bring with him” those who have “fallen asleep” (ESV). Some think this wording means that those who have died in Christ (and, as they thought, went to heaven at death) will return with Jesus when He comes. But this interpretation (explanation) does not agree with Paul’s own teaching in verse 16 that the resurrection (return to life) of dead believers takes place at the Second Coming, not before.

How does 1 Corinthians 15:20–23, 51–58 help us to understand the point in 1 Thessalonians 4:14?

We can understand what Paul is saying if we pay careful attention to his main point. He is comparing the death and resurrection of Jesus and the

death and resurrection of the believer. For Paul, the recent resurrection of Jesus from death was the guarantee (promise) that all believers would also be resurrected (raised from the dead) at the Second Coming. (Read also 1 Corinthians 15:20–23.) Paul’s religious teaching is always the same: “If we believe” (1 Thessalonians 4:14, NKJV) in the death and resurrection of Jesus, we should also believe in the resurrection of those who have died as true followers of Jesus.

So, Paul is using “through Jesus” in the same way that he uses “in Christ” in verse 16. The point Paul is making to the Thessalonians is that their dead brothers and sisters will not remain on earth when the living believers go to heaven. All will go to heaven together. (Read also John 14:1–3.) God does not “bring” the resurrected (brought back to life from the dead) Christians down to earth when Jesus comes. Instead (as He did with Jesus), God “brings” them up from the grave and, together with the living Christians, takes them to heaven. After Jesus rose from the dead, He went to heaven. In the same way, His faithful followers will rise from the grave on earth and go to heaven.



Jesus will bring the dead up from the grave and take them together with the living to heaven when He comes again.

WEDNESDAY—AUGUST 22**RISING IN CHRIST
(1 Thessalonians 4:15, 16)**

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11, Paul builds on the earthly teachings of Jesus. There are more than a dozen examples between these end-time verses and the sayings of Jesus recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But when Paul talks about the “word of the Lord” in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 (NKJV), he is talking about a saying of Jesus that did not make it into the four Gospels. Instead, Paul saves it for us. (Another example of Paul explaining that these teachings came directly from Jesus can be found in Acts 20:35.)

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:15, 16. According to Paul, what happens when Christ returns? Read also Revelation 1:7; Matthew 24:31; John 5:28, 29; and Acts 1:9–11.

The Second Coming of Jesus is a noisy event. He comes with a commanding shout from an archangel and the trumpet of God. Everyone will hear it and see it. (Read Revelation 1:7; Matthew 24:31; John 5:28, 29; and Acts 1:9–11.)

But the key (important) point for Paul is the order of the events that will occur when Jesus comes. The Thessalonians have started to believe that dying before the return of Jesus will involve some kind of disadvantage in the next life. They think this probably will mean eternal

physical separation from those who lived until Jesus’ return.

In this verse, Paul comforts the Thessalonians with the knowledge that the living believers do not come first or have any advantage (to be in a better position) over the dead. The dead in Christ will be the ones who rise first (read Revelation 20:4–6). That happens before the living will go up to meet Jesus in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:17). The righteous (saved) dead will be brought back to life and given eternal life along with those who are alive when He returns.

These verses do not teach that believers go to heaven when they die. If Paul had taught the Thessalonian believers that their dead loved ones were in heaven, why would they be grieving? And why did Paul not just tell them so? Instead, the comfort Paul offers here is the knowledge that the resurrection will reunite (join together) them with their loved ones.

Think about all that will happen at the second coming of Christ: Jesus comes in the sky. Everyone will see Him. The dead will be brought to life. The living will be given eternal life. And all will be taken together to heaven. In one sense, this idea is so foolish, and goes against what common sense, experience, and even science teach us. Yet, this is what we have to believe. If not, we have no hope. If you can trust the Lord in something like this, how can you not trust Him with whatever “smaller” things with which you are struggling?



Every eye shall see and every ear shall hear the Second Coming.

THURSDAY—AUGUST 23

COMFORT ONE ANOTHER (1 Thessalonians 4:13, 17, 18)

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13, 17, 18.
What is the most important reason for these verses about the second coming of Jesus?

As we said earlier, the purpose of prophecy is not to satisfy our curiosity about the future. Instead, it is to teach us how to live today. For Paul, the order of final events has useful suggestions for everyday Christian living. Prophecy is valuable because it influences the way we relate to God and to one another. In this case, Paul wants to use last-day events to bring comfort to those who have lost loved ones.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17.
What important parts of the Bible's teaching about the Second Coming are not covered in these verses? Read John 14:1–3; Matthew 24:31; and Acts 1:9–11.

These verses say that believers will join Jesus in the air to be with Him forever. The key theme (idea; topic) is the act of believers reuniting with one another and being together with Jesus. The verses are silent about where believers will go after the first meeting in the air. Paul clearly does not say that Jesus and the believers will come down from heaven to earth and rule there at the Second Coming. The verses only say that the movement of the saints will be upward. The dead believers will first rise up from their graves. Then they and the living believers will go together to meet their Lord in the air.

Paul gives additional information in 1 Corinthians 15:23, 24. Here he shows a strong connection between the experience of Jesus and of those “in Christ.” Jesus rose from the dead and ascended (went up) to heaven as a “first fruit.” This suggests that those who are in Him will have an experience that is very much the same as His.

The place the saints travel to is made clear in John 14:1–3. When Jesus comes, He will take His disciples to be where He is (heaven). Jesus will not come to join them where they are (on earth). This is why Adventists believe that during the 1,000 years after Jesus' return (Revelation 20:4–6), the righteous will be with Him in heaven. The wicked will be dead. And Satan will be made to stay on earth with no one to tempt (to cause to sin) or bother. Only after 1,000 years will the faithful come back to live on the earth (2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 3:12).

Look at how “heavenly and wonderful” our hope is! How could it be any other way? After all, what real, long-term hope does this world offer us? How can we learn not to get so caught up in what the world offers us?

FRIDAY—AUGUST 24

ADDITIONAL STUDY: “Many explain this verse [1 Thessalonians 4:14] to mean that the sleeping ones will be brought with Christ from heaven. But Paul meant that as Christ was raised from the dead, so God will call the sleeping saints from their graves. Then God will take them with Him to heaven.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, page 259.

“The Thessalonians had eagerly grasped the idea that Christ was coming to change the faithful who were alive, and to take them to Himself. They had carefully guarded the lives of their friends, in the event they should die and lose the blessing that they looked forward to receiving at the coming of their Lord. But one after another their loved ones had been taken from them. And with sadness the Thessalonians had looked for the last time upon the faces of their dead. They dared not hope to meet them in a future life.

“As Paul’s letter was opened and read, great joy and peace were brought to the church by the words showing the true state of the dead. Paul showed that those living when Christ should come would not go to meet their Lord ahead of those who

had fallen asleep in Jesus.”—Page 258, adapted.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

❶ In class, discuss what it means to “live like an Adventist.” What is it about some of our special beliefs that should be shown in our lifestyle as Adventists?

❷ Think about the Fall of man, the plan of salvation, and the promise of eternal life. What did Jesus do that gives us the hope, and promise, that death will not be forever? What reasons do we have for trusting in what Jesus has done for us? How does the resurrection (return to life) of Jesus Himself offer us great hope that we will be brought back to life too if we die before He returns? How can we receive comfort from the plan of salvation, especially when death seems so final, so sure, and so unforgiving?

❸ As a group, read aloud the verses for this week. Then talk about what they mean, how they make you feel, and the hope and promise found in them.

SUMMARY: In this week’s verses, Paul corrects several misunderstandings about the state of the dead and the events that come with the second coming of Jesus. When Jesus returns, the dead in Christ will rise first. Then all believers will go together to meet Jesus in the air. Believers can take great comfort in knowing that the separation from believing loved ones is only for a short time.